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Farion, Brigitte Interview

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Stockton Immigrant Women Oral History Collection

by Sally Miller

German Immigrant: Farion, Brigitte

No Date

Interviewed by Mike Landis

Transcribed by Jordan Sears-Zeve

[TAPE 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape.]

MIKE LANDIS: I'm interviewing Mrs. Brigitte Farion from Germany, and she came over here in 1956. Mrs. Farion, can you tell me about your early life, that is before you came to this country.

BRIGITTE FARION: Well, I was born in Stuttgart Germany in 1943, June 13th 1943 to be exact, during war times, war torn Europe. My mother and father and two brothers. My mother [a long pause] was married to my father who was a German soldier in Hitler, when Hitler was in power. He was an officer in the SS army. Which is an elite type army, which would be considered like the people you have today that graduate from Westpoint or one of the academies. When I was one and a half, my father was in Russia, and was killed at age 29. My brothers were four and five at that time. My mother then worked at a canteen to help support us and she, there at the canteen, met a GI and married him. They later had a son together, which they named Patrick. Well, all was going well. The rest of my family, my mother's family and everyone work in breweries and shoes, making shoes in Europe. They work for Salamander Shoes which are still

a very popular leather shoe in Europe. My father then, my step father, my GI stepfather, received orders to go back to the states to get his discharge. President Roosevelt said they couldn't bring their wives until they were discharged. And he made a rule that all European marriages were void. My stepfather pleaded his case that he needed to give his wife and son to America. This he was able to do, but he was only able – President Roosevelt ruled that GI's were only allowed to bring their natural children, not children of German descent. But my mother was told that in two or three months we would be allowed to come to the United States and live with her there. That it would just take some papers and some... some paperwork. They left immediately, when she got notice that she could leave, she immediately left with my other half brother.

LANDIS: How many brothers did you have?

FARION: I have two natural brothers and a half brother by my mother's GI husband.

LANDIS: Okay...

FARION: When she got her notice she had leave so immediately, she had not time to prepare us for the separation. She left us with my grandparents my [ringing noise]. What my mother did not know was that no sooner had she gotten on the boat to come to the United States when my grandparents died. First my grandfather because of poor health and stress from the war and my grandmother died just a few weeks later, from grieving to death from the death of my grandfather. I was placed, because I was not of age and I was still young, I was not allowed to stay. My brothers were allowed to stay on their own, they were considered old enough in Germany to take care of themselves but they were not considered old enough to be guardians of me. They were all in the apprenticeship program working an apprenticeship which most boys in Germany do at a very young age of 13 or 14. I was therefore placed in a foster home, in the home of some German people who were very, very bitter about the war. They had lost both of their children in the war and they were very bitter towards me, very bitter towards American soldiers. They used me more or less as a slave to clean to cook to take care of the house. Anything that they could make me do. The only salvation I had was that on the weekends my brothers would come to visit me, but when they saw how I was treated and how my mother had left us all they were very bitter. They were bitter about the war and they were bitter towards my mother and all events that had come about. My mother, in the meantime, had settled in New Jersey with her GI husband and their new son for 2 years she worked diligently to get me and my brothers brought to the United States. She had no idea the undertaking this would be. She had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized for eight months but she kept working and working, trying to cut through the red tape to get us to her side. Finally, in 1956, we got word that we had passage on a ship to New York, and my brothers and I were to come to New York.

LANDIS: You must have been pretty happy about that.

FARION: Yes, we were. My brothers were not, by this time my brothers, I was 13 but my brothers were 16 and 17, they had started to establish lives of their own and were deep into jobs and girlfriends and they did, they were very bitter towards my mother, they did not want to come to the United States. So they took me to the boat and I was sent to...

LANDIS: Did you want to come over.

FARION: I did, because I still wanted to see my mother I still felt very attached to me mother because I was young when she left me but I still loved my mother a lot. So, when, I got on the boat, many people watching over me on the boat and on a Sunny day in August-

LANDIS: Were you scared at all?

FARION: Yes, yes I was scared. But I was just so happy to be away from the foster home and the strife, the ugliness of Germany that the war had left war torn that I was so glad to be heading to America, the land we were told always that was the land of gold and sunshine and all good things. On a sunny day in August 1956, I arrived in the New York harbor to be met by my mother, stepfather, and stepbrother. We lived in Criton, New Jersey. My stepfather was very bitter towards the Germans, very bitter about the war, and from the moment that I arrived there, he forbid me to ever speak German. Now, mind you, I had not ever spoken English. I had lived in Germany all my life, my family, everyone had only spoken German. He forbid my mother to talk to m in German, and my stepbrother did not know German because he had been just a baby and had only been spoken English to when they came to the United States. So if I wanted to say anything or wanted to say anything to anyone I had to say it in English, or no one answered me.

LANDIS: Was that pretty difficult? You're so used to being, talking in one-

FARION: It was, but because no one would talk to me, I quickly learned to speak English.

LANDIS: Yeah, kinda forced to isn't it?

FARION: And because of that today I rarely had an accent. No one even realizes that I am German. I just became Americanized immediately. I was taken to Trenton, New Jersey. I went to Trenton High School, they figured that I should be in about the 9th grade, and I was dropped off at the high school and placed in a-

LANDIS: That must have been a pretty scary feeling for you.

FARION: It was a very scary feeling to be in.

LANDIS: Tend and new.

FARION: A new land, a new family, a new school. But the students and kids were very nice to me. Made me feel very at home.

LANDIS: They didn't make any fun of you?

FARION: No, they did not make fun of me. They treated me like one of them. And I got part time jobs in the neighborhood working in the bakery and doing odd jobs and became very Americanized. By the time I graduated from high school I had met a soldier myself was in the air force. He served in the air force in the Korean war in the air force for 4 years at which time I traveled with him whenever I could. When he was discharged, he was discharged at Travis Airspace in California, and he was an apprentice plumber. So, we liked California, when he was released there, we decided to make our home in nearby Napa, and my husband went to work for Mayor Island. We have lived there ever since. Last summer in June of 1980, my husband decided that it would be wonderful for me to see my brothers again, that I have not seen in all these years. My brothers live, one still lives in Stutgaurd and one lives in Switzerland. In, on the border of Switzerland and Germany on Lake Constance, which is just between the two countries. Y'know, I have not been back, as I said, since I have been just a small boy.

LANDIS: Did it feel good to get back there?

FARION: Well, it is such a different country it's not at all like I remember it. It's still much different from the United States. But, we arrived in Stutgaurd to meet my brother and his wife and he has now become – in Germany – a very wealthy man in his apprentice program he has made a lot of money. And he owns property and is now considered one of the more wealthy Germans. After visiting Germany we went on to Switzerland to meet my other brother who I have also not seen in all these years. He is married now, and has children, in fact he has a 17 and a half year old daughter named Heidi who is planning to come next year to the United States to live with me for a year because she would like to see our country.

LANDIS: Can you think of any differences between your life when you came to the United States and that of your own children now?

FARION: Yes, yes I can. The people in the United States are much more liberal and freer with their children, they are not as strict, they do not expect as much. Things in Germany are very expensive, for instance to go to a disco or things is 5 or 6 dollars for a drink. Even today, people do not have the money there. When I was growing up no one had the money to do things, to own property is a real thing. It's not like the United States where almost everyone has a house, everyone lives in small apartments and complexes. Only the very rich own their own land. It is expensive to drive over there.

LANDIS: How much is gas by the gallon compared to...?

FARION: 2.50 or 3 dollars a gallon for gas.

LANDIS: Was it like that when you were little?

FARION: Well, my family did not have a car when I was little. We did not have cars.

LANDS: Hm. How did you guys get around?

FARION: Bicycles, mostly. People still today bicycle. And mopeds are a big thing over there now. And teenagers go by bus a lot because people cannot afford to own cars because of the gas and the high cost of cars and things in the United States I, in Germany. One thing that's big, and always has been big in Germany, and even when I was younger, is the sports program. Everyone starts gymnastics at an early age and then it's paid for through the schools and things. Kindergarten through high school participate in a gymnastic program.

LANDIS: Even if you don't like it you have to?

FARION: Yes, you have to. Socially, the most popular thing is sports. Every school today and it had Olympic sized pools and children get involved in sports. They get involved in sports at a young age and they participate in these sports on through their older age. Women my age join to sports groups in middle school and they are still involved in them for life. One things that people in Germany tend to do is they don't relocate like people do in the United States. They settle in an area and they tend to stay in the area. Like my brother and his family has all stayed within that area. They don't move around like we in the United States tend to do. They love to dance still, they always loved to dance. Even as a child I remember dancing and dancing at the canteen.

LANDIS: What's the canteen?

FARION: Well, during the war the canteens like, uhm, [mumble] used to have dances and things for the GI's to keep them entertained, and the German girls would dance there, dance with the GI's, and I can remember standing outside and watching as a child because it was great sport to see people dance that was a way for us to express our happiness. And they still love to dance a lot. There is no alcoholic problem.

LANDIS: Did you ever drink one because they age limit, they didn't even have an age limit, right?

FARION: No, they don't have an age limit.

LANDIS: So, did you drink when you were younger?

FARION: Not when I... when I lived in my foster home I was never given an opportunity, to the...

LANDIS: Kids didn't really... They don't think it's such a big deal there, since it's legal.

FARION: And, besides that, it was always expensive. And it's still today, when we went back, it's very expensive.

LANDIS: The beer is?

FARION: Yes, to drink at a disco or anything is expensive, and people still make small wages. Last summer one of the popular groups over there would when, we'd go dancing and we went with my niece and some nephews, a few times was Abba, was a popular group. They often went to discos like we do here today. The people still work hard over there six days a week children go to school.

LANDIS: They go to school six days a week?

FARION: Six days, and they are intellectually above our schools.

LANDIS: I thought five was pretty bad.

FARION: Everyone starts into an apprenticeship program very early in life. By the time they're 14 or 15, they are involved in an apprenticeship program. They, women still do not have as much say so as we do here. They get to go, of course, but they don't get to vote on local issues. They still have town meetings and the women are not invited to the town meetings for the local issues.

LANDIS: Mm-hm. Are women, if, when you were there, were they involved in politics or government or anything?

FARION: No... because that was so much during the war and right after the war, mostly people were real interesting in rebuilding their war torn cities, and resuming their lives as they had been before the war.

LANDIS: Had, are they involved in government and politics now?

FARION: Yes, yes more so today. The women dress up more to, then the American women, to shop and things. But still, the two most popular clothes to wear are, in Germany even now, are Levi's and Additas. The popular teen foods are wurst and a French roll. You put the wurst in one hand and the French roll in the other, and you do not put it together. They do not have sandwiches. You eat a bite of the wurst, a bite of the French roll, because you can't buy sliced bread there. They do not slice bread. You just buy the bread in the bakery and-

LANDIS: Do you ever it like that now? Or do you just make sandwiches?

FARION: Still, I have become very Americanized in my family and my children like sandwiches and so does my husband, but it was really fun for me to see how different life is, even today in the United States and Germany. The children help with the fall. They have a vacation in the fall to harvest. They don't have vacations at Christmas, like we do.

LANDIS: Do they celebrate Christmas like we do?

FARION: They celebrate Christmas, but they don't have school holidays because they-

LANDIS: Buy each other presents and...

FARION: Yes, they, and we send to my brother's children presents and he in turn sends to my children and I'm anxious for when my children get a little older for them to have to opportunity to visit my brothers in Switzerland and Germany. And, if Heidi is able to come, live with us my brothers are anxious for her to see the United States and learn from us.

LANDIS: Kay, what is life like for people from your country?

FARION: Well, today life for people from country is relatively simple, at first people who came from Germany... the American people were resentful, a little resentful because of the war and their part in the war that made them dislike the Germans, but today they are very accepting and I don't feel like there's any...

LANDIS: Have you felt very close to the old country?

FARION: I have not felt close to the old country except for the fact that my brothers still live there. I have always kept in touch with them. They have never forgiven my mother, and have never come to see my mother again. They cannot get over the bitterness they feel at her because she left as at such an early age.

LANDIS: Do you keep in touch with any of your other friends there? Did they move over here or...?

FARION: When I went back, I went back to my old home and to the country side that I was from and I did see some of my old childhood friends, most of them.

LANDIS: Did you ever write to them?

FARION: No, but I do, as I said write to my brother and his family. And I, they keep my informed of my friends. Bur because I left there when I was relatively young, most of my friends have disappeared from that area.

LANDIS: Do you feel that you're affected by what happens there? In Germany?

FARION: Well, I do feel that I am affected, because I still have family. Nieces, nephews, brothers there. And I do feel effected.

LANDIS: When you first got to the United States, did you think yourself still as German, or what?

FARION: Yes, I did feel myself as a German. I missed my brothers dreadfully, at first, but because I had lived in the foster home away from them, it wasn't like I saw them every day anyway, and I only saw them on weekends when they came to see me. But I had been raised to be a German child, and that's the way I behaved. It did not take me long to adapt to the American customs and the American ways.

LANDIS: Have your attitudes toward the country changed any over the time?

FARION: Well, I, the United States has so much more to offer to everyone than Germany. As it was nice to go back for a visit, but I would not ever want to live there or be part of their country and their ways today.

LANDIS: Are there any holiday differences in Germany than USA that you had to get used to or anything like that?

FARION: No, well, of course we do not have Lincoln's birthday and Washington's birthday, and Martin Luther King's birthday, those of course as not celebrated in Germany because those are purely American holidays. Christmas is celebrated, but because people do not have the money and it's not celebrated in such a commercial way as it is in the United States, families try to remain close, many grandmothers and grandfathers live in the home with the children. They do not have separate homes. Usually the mothers and fathers stay on with their children and their children's children. People work in the factories and at lunch time, even last year when we were there I found it amusing that it was still much the same, that all school and factories and businesses close down at noon and everyone goes home to have their meal together. The mother starts preparing the meal early in the day so that when all the family members come to home to have the meal together-

LANDIS: Is there an particular [interruption in the tape] is there a special...

FARION: Oh, potatoes, wurst, sauerkraut, cappy...

LANDIS: And there's no, when you lived in Germany was religion heavily practiced there?

FARION: Yes, it is. About half of the west Germans are Protestants, and out of this almost all of those group are Lutherans. Religion is practiced in the schools even. If we, it, Germans was one

of the first countries to set up a public education system, and within that system, they practice their religion. Because it is controlled chiefly by the state government religions instruction is given in the schools. It was and it still is today. Children must go to school from the age of 6 to 18, and during this time much religious instruction is given. In the fourth or fifth grade, a child's future education is decided on by giving them a special test. Students that have highest scores on these tests transfer-

LANDIS: Did you have to take these tests?

FARION: Yes, every student does. And they, once they get the highest scores, transfer to high schools that prepare them to enter a University. They spend up to nine years in high school sometimes. For students that do not transfer to a high school, they attend vocational schools either full time or part time after graduation from elementary school.

LANDIS: What kinds of things did you do when you had free time over in Germany?

FARION: Well, movies were very big. Laurel and Hardy and Tarzan were very popular when I was a small girl. Just like they probably were here. We spent a lot of time going to the movies. Played cowboys and Indians, and...

LANDIS: The boys let you play cowboys and Indians?

FARION: Yeah, they let us play somewhat. I'm sure much like the children in the United States do. We skied, and 6 months out of the year there's snow in Germany, so every boy and girl learns to ski at a very early age, it's not really considered a sport, it's a necessity. You, it's just, I'm sure there's not a child who lives in Germany who does not ski, because that's just like...

LANDIS: Was it very expensive to ski there?

FARION: No, because there weren't lifts like there are in the United States, you just climbed the hills and skied down. Worked your way up to the top. There weren't lifts and chairs...

LANDIS: There is now, though, isn't there?

FARION: Well, in your resort areas there is, yes of course, but in, when I was growing up there was not.

LANDIS: Uh-huh. Lot of exercise, eh? What else did you do, do you remember?

FARION: Oh, swimming was big, track and field were very big. We used to watch the other students competing; if you weren't competing you were watching. Soccer was always very big in Germany, even when I was a child. Every town had what was called a sports hall. They had indoor swimming pools, weights to build muscles, other games, and entertainment. All in the

sport area, and it was all free because Germany likes to build good athletes, and sports are very, very important to them.

LANDIS: What about anything else?

FARION: Well every Sunday we all went to church. All German children attend church on Sunday, and it's a big family affair. Then we'd come home, eat a large dinner. Our noon meal again of saurbrachten, kraut, veal, pork...

LANDIS: Are the churches kinda the same as in America?

FARION: Yes, much the same type of church.

LANDIS: About how much education did your mother and father have in Germany.

FARION: My mother graduated from high school and worked in her father's factory with was a shoe factory, she worked there, and my father had graduated from vocational school. He, when he was inducted into the army in his early years, all boys in Germany are required at 18 years of age to go into the service and serve some time in the service. It's just when you turn 18 you are inducted into the military, and Germany has a large military on call at all times. My father went into the military at a young age and, as I said earlier in the interview, he was in the SS Army, which is a very elite army because he scored high on testing and things, and he was made an officer and was an officer in the German army under Hitler at the time of his death.

LANDIS: Did he have any regrets about Hitler or anything like that?

FARION: No, because he was raised, and my mother and he were both raised to believe that Hitler was their leader, and they believed what he says.

LANDIS: Mm-hm... The people liked Hitler? Or, they were kinda scared of him, or what?

FARION: Well, they didn't like him because they were frightened of him, and scared of him, but they did not question him because they were taught not to question his motives, and my father at, I was very young when my father died, but from what my mother tells me, you know, he was very loyal. Very loyal person in the service and was glad to die for his country.

LANDIS: Let's go back on your marriage, a little. After you, after you married how did you two make your decisions?

FARION: Well, because I have spent a good deal of time in the United States since my early teens, I am more Americanized than most girls would be coming from Germany. My husband and I have made most of our decisions together... much more than my mother was allowed to

do. My mother was not ever allowed to make a decision. Her American GI husband made all decisions and she had no say so about our upbringing or anything about us.

LANDIS: How did you resolve your difference, if there was any/

FARION: We'd talk them over, discuss them. I am very lucky because I have a very kind, considerate husband who is very proud of my background and his is pleased to help me with any problems.

LANDIS: How did you two divide your responsibilities, such as housework and stuff like that? Taking care of the children, perhaps?

FARION: Well, I do not work, and my husband does work, so we, I do the housework, and I've taken care of the children since they were babies. But I don't think this is because I am German, this is because that is just how my husband and I feel it should be done.

LANDIS: Are your childrearing practices different from your mothers?

FARION: Very much so. But because my mother was raising children in a time of war and a time of country being torn down and her children were separated from. My children have been very lucky, and had a very nice life here in the United States, and money to spend and they're secure physically and mentally, which we were not. We were very frightened. We were frightened of the war. I was very, very frightened when my mother was taken from me for so long. My brothers...

LANDIS: Do you remember anything about the war when you were little? How old were you when the war was on? About 2, huh?

FARION: Yes, I was born in 1933, so I was 2 when the war ended. So what I can remember is not actually the war but the soldiers and the poorness and the ruins.

LANDIS: What were you especially proud of in running your home?

FARION: I'm especially proud today in running my home, that I have nice children, I have a nice home, I have nice furniture, nice neighborhood I live, where we're secure.

LANDIS: You get along good with your neighbors?

FARION: Yes, I do get along very well.

LANDIS: There any other Germans around here?

FARION: No, there are... there's one or two, where my children go to school that I am friends with that have come over much later than I did. Did not come until maybe the last five or six years.

LANDIS: Do you get along good with them? They good to talk over?

FARION: Yes, it's nice to talk over times. But as I said, last year we went back to Germany. That was wonderful for me because I had forgotten so much that I could not recall much about Germany. Now I can talk to them about it.

LANDIS: Taken all the things together, would you say you're happy, pretty happy, or not too happy with the way your married life has turned out?

FARION: I would say I'm very happy, I'm very lucky, I am lucky that I got to come to the United States. In this land, my life would have been far different had I had to stay in Germany I probably would have worked in the factory girls there.

LANDIS: So you don't think you have any regrets?

FARION: No, I don't. The only regret I have is that my brothers were not able to come with me, and that they never do want to come to the United States.

LANDIS: You miss them a lot?

FARION: Yes, I do miss them a lot, and I think about them often.

LANDIS: Did you get along real well when you were children?

FARION: Yes, we were very, very close as children. And they watched out for me a good deal when my mother left, and I, that is my only regret, that I cannot see them more and we cannot be together.

LANDIS: Would you say that the goals that you had for your family are different from those of your parents?

FARION: Yes, I'm sure they are very different. Because my parents did not have the expectations for me that I have for my children, because my children have so many more opportunities. They have an opportunity, both male and female, to go to college. There are opportunities in medicine, that women and men can go into. My daughters have a, so much more than when I was growing up.

LANDIS: Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Farion, for giving me your time. I really appreciate it.

FARION: You're very welcome, Mike, it was fun doing it with you.

LANDIS: You've been very helpful, and I'm sure, you know...

FARION: I hope I helped answer some of the questions about my journey

LANDIS: You've been very helpful, and thank you very much. Goodbye.

[End of Tape]